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Employees of defunct Decker remain in limbo

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Some students of now-defunct Decker College will have a shot at getting part of their money back, the state Public Protection Cabinet announced last week; but the online school's former employees, including about 60 in Bowling Green, are still waiting to hear when they might get their final paychecks from 2005.

"We haven't heard anything for a while," said Joda Johnson.

She only worked at Decker's call center on Bryant Way for a month and a half, and was owed about \$1,200, but other workers had expected more, she said.

Other employees had gotten raises for recruiting 10 students a day, Johnson said.

"It was based on how many students you brought in for the company," she said.

Johnson said she knows bankruptcy cases take time to resolve, but she didn't expect it to take more than three years – and it's likely to take at least a couple of more.

Employees of the local call center showed up Aug. 24, 2005, expecting their promised paychecks – only to find the building closed and locked, with on-site managers unresponsive. Higher company officials, reached by phone, assured them that pay would be coming soon, and said they could be back at work in a couple of weeks. None of that happened.

In September 2005, as the company declared bankruptcy, local employees filed suit through attorney Matt Baker.

He said Wednesday that he hears occasionally from the "60-odd" local Decker employees, asking where the case stands.

"I'm forced to tell them that there's no end in sight," Baker said.

The Bowling Green office was part of the online arm of Louisville-based Decker College, which had campuses in Louisville, Atlanta, Indianapolis and Jacksonville, Fla. The local office had been open just more than four months when the business collapsed.

Decker promised to teach barbering, carpentry, electrical, heating and air conditioning work during six-week courses, but it shut down under federal and state investigations amid charges that it didn't provide promised training and job placement for \$10,000 tuition.

The U.S. Department of Education decertified Decker College and demanded the return of \$7.2 million in federal student aid, and cut off further federal funding during the investigation. Investigators said the heavy emphasis on online coursework wasn't approved by accreditation agencies, and that Decker hadn't returned money from students who had dropped out.

Decker College students in fall 2005 who were Kentucky residents may get a partial refund for tuition, books and fees from the Kentucky State Board for Proprietary Education Student Protection Fund, according to Dick Brown, spokesman for the Kentucky Public Protection Cabinet.

And the investigations seem to be winding down. Baker said he spoke with Louisville-based bankruptcy trustee Bob Keats on Monday, who said the government has returned masses of documents seized during the investigation.

"Mr. Keats advises that the government is not going to pursue any further actions against Decker College by way of the investigation it was conducting," Baker said.

But it's still likely to take two or three years of litigation before the situation is all sorted out, Keats said.

He said he's trying to convince the U.S. Department of Education that Decker's accreditation shouldn't have been pulled. If he can do that, federal aid should flow again, enabling him to pay off what Decker owes other government agencies, then employees, then other businesses and finally students, he said. Employees should get something direct from Decker before former students do, but none can expect anything soon, Keats said.

"At this point, we have no money," he said.

The FBI seized about 750 boxes of files from the school more than three years ago, and Keats said he just got them back, thoroughly scrambled, in January.

Those will take a long time to sort out, but he looks forward to the "happy problem" of having money to distribute to more than 600 claimants, he said.